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ABSTRACT

This research project studied the perceived quality of the library and information science literature and asked questions regarding international librarianship. Additionally, it questioned what librarians read, how they choose their reading material, and how they use the literature for their decision making. The sample consisted of librarians from the United States who were perceived as leaders or activists within the library science profession; 243 names were randomly chosen from the American Library Association (ALA) Handbook of Organization, and 116 valid surveys, or 53%, were returned. The instrument consisted of 18 questions and a list of journals (respondents were asked to identify titles that they read from this list). The respondents were mostly female (83.5 percent). All types of libraries were represented with academic libraries being the most abundant. In many aspects, this study confirms the findings of earlier studies or research and shows that librarians still believe professional reading is an important part of their professional life and they are still critical of the quality. Librarians want to read more, but "lack of time" is the big deterrent; most chose their reading material by browsing a journal. Another finding is that most US librarians are interested in information science issues worldwide. A table lists library science journals with statistics for "usually read," "sometimes read," and "total per cent of readers." (Contains 6 references.) (AEF)

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The Professional Reading Habits of American Librarians

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

"A dramatic shift is occurring in the professional reading habits of librarians," writes Donald Riggs (1994), editor of Library Hi Tech in an editorial called "What Librarians are Seeking in the Professional Literature." In it, he contends that librarians are less interested in "philosophical, theoretical, and research-based" information and more interested in information with practical applications. He states "technology, with all its virtues, has placed an increasing demand on the workload of practicing librarians" and "...with less time for reflection and research, librarians depend on publications that are relevant and assist them in their daily chores."

Melissa Laning (1999), in "Professional Journal Reading: A Survey of Kentucky Academic Libraries" refers to the "perceived poor quality" of the literature. She writes "Two conflicting threads concerning the literature of librarianship have been established. Librarians read their professional literature; and the professional literature of librarianship is not very good." Her study of academic librarians in Kentucky set out to prove or disprove these "threads." The result was that 71.1% of the study's respondents rated the quality of the literature as "positive" or "somewhat positive." Twenty-nine percent of the librarians chose "neutral" or "somewhat negative" as their response. No one had a "very" negative opinion of the literature. Laning does not reveal whether she believes these numbers confirm or dispute previous opinions regarding the quality of the literature. Her research does confirm that librarians "read their professional literature."

Peter Hernon (1996) laments both the lack of research and the lack of quality in the research. He looks to editors to be the "gatekeepers" of the professional literature and urges them to raise the bar on the

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research articles they accept and publish. Hernon also contends that library issues are universal and that the profession expects library and information science journals to meet the need for information.

Stephen Lehmann's study of German library journals was conducted to "open the windows of American librarianship more widely." He contends that, not only are most Americans uninformed about the world outside the US, American librarians also ignore developments in libraries elsewhere, "often at our own peril." This isolationist perception is another thread within the library literature.

METHODOLOGY

This research project also studied the perceived quality of the literature and asked questions regarding international librarianship. Additionally, it questioned what librarians read, how they choose their reading material, and how they use the literature for their decision making. The sample consisted of librarians from the United States. The decision was made to use librarians who are perceived as leaders or activists within the library science profession so 243 names were randomly chosen from the American Library Association (ALA) Handbook of Organization. Of this number, 19 or 7.8% were returned because of wrong addresses, 4 or 1.65 were returned unusable. One hundred and sixteen valid surveys were received or 53% of the number of surveys distributed; minus the unusable and wrongly addressed surveys. The instrument consisted of 18 questions and a list of journals (respondents were asked to identify titles that they read from this list). Several of the questions were modeled after questions on the Laning instrument so that results of the 2 surveys could be compared. The software SPSS was used to tabulate the results of this research.

RESULTS

The respondents were mostly female (83.5 percent). All types of libraries were represented with academic libraries being the most abundant. Forty-six percent were academic, 28% public, 6% school, 2% special, and 18% went into the category of "other." "Other" included consultants, library faculty, editors, and administrators of regional library systems, state libraries, and professional organizations. All but two of the respondents claimed an MLS, and 14 (or 12%) also possessed a PhD.

An interesting revelation was the cumulative years of library service represented by all of these librarians. The 116 respondents represent 2,455 years of service! There is much discussion in the literature of the graying or aging of library professionals and the data in this survey could be interpreted as verifying this as a trend. The pool, however, was selected from those librarians who are active in a professional organization and this generally does not occur within the first few years of professional life. So, librarians new to the field were rare in this sample. Still, the respondents had an average number of 23 years service to libraries. The median year was 24 with a mode of 30. (see figure 1)

The study revealed that librarians believe professional reading is an important part of their professional life. Sixty-eight percent ranked it as "very important" and a total of 98% ranked it as either "very" or "somewhat important." Only 2% were neutral and less than 1 percent, or 1 person ranked it as "not so important." No one believed that it is not important at all. (see figure 2) They were also asked to rank the importance of professional reading for ideas or professional stimulation among these other sources; conferences, professional organizations, other librarians, classes or courses, or "other." Conferences was ranked as the number one source of professional stimulation by 38% of the librarians while professional reading came in second with 23%. "Other librarians" was a close third with 22%. (see figure 3)

This belief, that the literature is important and relevant, is evident in the quantity of reading that librarians do. Forty-three percent of the librarians indicated that they browse or read 3 to 4 journals per month. Another 33% read 4 to 5 journals per month. However, when presented with a list of journals and asked to the check the ones that they "usually" or "sometimes" read, they indicated far more than 3 to 5 journals. The list was comprised of 105 library and information science journals, 16 of which are electronic journals. These titles are the ones listed (recommended) in *Magazines for Libraries* under the heading of "Library and Information Science." They do not include publications that are primarily used for book selection, such as *Choice* or *Booklist*. According to the responses, librarians read an average of

13 different titles. Librarians identified another 80 unique titles under "other." Here, they often indicated titles used for book selection or titles specific to their discipline or position. For example, many academic librarians wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Several youth services or children's librarians added journals such as *Young Children* or *Storyteller*.

It is not surprising to learn that 4 of the 5 journal titles that were most often selected as "usually" or "sometimes" read are journals published by the American Library Association. Figure 4 indicates the top choices:

Figure 4

JOURNAL	Usually read (N)	Sometimes read (N)	Total % of readers
American Libraries	93	14	92%
Library Journal	58	35	80%
College & Research Libraries	43	21	55%
College & Research Libraries News	43	14	49%
Library Administration & Management	22	31	46%
Library Trends	15	35	43%
Computers in Libraries	16	34	43%
Journal of Academic Librarianship	17	30	41%
Library Hotline	33	12	39%
Public Libraries	26	16	36%
School Library Journal	26	14	35%
Reference & User Services Quarterly	22	14	31%
Library Quarterly	12	21	28%
Library Hi Tech	5	26	27%
ALAWON (e-journal)	21	9	26%
VOYA	16	12	24%
Journal of Youth Services	15	11	23%
Information Technology and Libraries	15	11	22%
Against the Grain	6	20	22%
Library Technology Reports	5	18	20%
Library of Congress Information Bulletin	11	11	19%
Library Resources & Technical Services	10	12	19%
The Reference Librarian	8	14	19%
Collection Management	3	19	19%
RSR	6	15	18%
IFLA Journal	4	17	18%

A comparison of this list with lists compiled in 1973 (Swisher, 1982) and 1993 (Laning, 1999) reveals that several titles have maintained their popularity through the years. These are: *American Libraries* (first on all lists), *College & Research Libraries*, and *Library Journal*. New to this list are several technology titles; *Library Hi Tech, Information Technology and Libraries*, and *Library*

Technology Reports. *Computers in Libraries* appeared on the 1993 list as well as this list. The 1993 list also included the technology titles, *CD-ROM Librarian* and *Online*.

Librarians subscribe or receive from professional memberships an average of 3 journals. They also read journals purchased by their libraries, from other libraries, or use the library indexes to seek out articles of interest. When using indexes to find specific articles they are most often looking for information to solve a problem within their own library; 64% use the indexes for this reason. Nearly half seek out specific articles for their own professional growth or curiosity and approximately one third seek information to use for presentations or publication.

Still, with all this reading going on, 60% of the librarians said the amount of reading they do is insufficient! When presented with a list of possible circumstances that might allow for increased reading, the favorite response was "scheduled reading time at work (55%)." Other choices with frequent responses were "more topics in my interest area" and "improved quality of the literature." The other choices were selected by less than 20% of the respondents. These choices were: lower journal costs, table of contents service, more purchases by my library, encouragement by supervisors, and other (a write-in choice). Interestingly, 16% of the respondents wrote in "more time" under "other."

Once a journal is received or selected to read, most librarians (48%) browse the journal and read only articles that interest them. Almost a fourth (23%) flip through the journals and read some or all of every article. Another fourth (27%) skip browsing and use the Table of Contents to select articles to read. Very few librarians, only 4 in the sample, said they read the entire journal.

Librarians were asked to identify the types of materials that they are most likely to select to read. Sixty-one percent said they look for articles that pertain to their work life, whether they are research articles or simply articles with practical applications. Research or practitioner articles on varied topics are less favored with less than a quarter of the respondents identifying them as "likely to read." The second favorite topic was news articles (46%). Many librarians are also interested in the profession (39%) and editorial or opinion pieces (39%). When asked if the fact that a journal is refereed is important, they were evenly split. Half said it is important, the other half said "no." Several who indicated that it is important stated that, for them, "refereed" equated to improved quality. Other comments made it clear that many readers believe it depends on the purpose of the inquiry. As simply stated by one respondent, "Depends, for research yes, for practical purposes, no." Another commented, "I read what is useful and I am my own referee." Several questioned what was meant by the term "refereed journal."

Whether librarians give a high or low rating to the quality of the literature is open to interpretation. Laning inferred that the percentage of librarians giving a positive or somewhat positive rating to the literature in her study was low at 71.1%. Some might argue that 7 out of 10 is not bad! This study revealed that 60% of respondents rated the quality as "very high" or "high" which indicates the perception of the literature quality is dropping. Nearly one third rated it average and 6% said it was "somewhat low." Less than 2% said it was "low" in quality. As stated earlier, one quarter of the respondents said they would "read more" if there was an improvement in the quality of the literature.

Another issue of interest in this study was whether or not librarians see library issues as being universal as does Peter Hernon. Respondents were asked if they read articles that dealt with international issues and were then asked why they answered as they did. The responses were divided into the broad categories depicted in Figure 5. The majority of the librarians, 66%, said they do take interest in international issues and the most common reason given was that libraries are part of a "global community." The essence of the following two comments appeared on many surveys: "We are all a part of the same profession and having a global perspective is important, especially now. It increases my understanding of issues facing others and gives me a heightened appreciation." Or "We are more "global" than we were a decade ago. It's vitally important to all disciplines." Of those respondents who said they did not read about library issues facing other nations the most common reasons were "lack of time (12%)" or "not relevant to what I do (13%)." These two answers are interrelated. The following is an accurate paraphrase on many of the comments: "It is not that I am not interested, it is simply that there is not enough time to read everything. So I concentrate on information from similar institutions that will help me in my own job." Some, such as a librarian from a correctional institution, pointed out the lack of

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comparative situations outside the US. A few felt that US libraries were more advanced and had more to offer to the literature. Other commenters chastised this type of thinking with comments such as "unfortunately a lot of US librarians are focused nearly exclusively on their own backyard." And "sadly, librarians often do not rise above the "cluelessness" of the general public."

Survey participants were also asked if they thought the events of September 11 would have any impact on the interest in international librarianship. The majority, 39% said it would have no impact. Only 26% answered yes and 35% were uncertain. However, many of the respondents who answered "uncertain" commented that it should have an impact but stated they were uncertain if it would, once again referring to the isolationist attitude of many Americans. Prevalent comments were similar to the "global environment" comments for the previous question. A significant number mentioned that librarians have a moral obligation to offer our patrons many viewpoints and up-to-date information on world affairs and that September 11 served as a harsh reminder of this responsibility. Other commented that the Patriot Act is a result of September 11 and that librarians should show concern for a free press and freedom to read regardless of where the reader resides.

DISCUSSION

In many aspects, this study confirms the findings of earlier studies or research. Librarians still read their professional literature and they are still critical of the quality. But this study revealed some other details that may help to guide in the improvement of the literature. Librarians obviously want to read more but "lack of time" is the big deterrent. Combine this with the fact that most chose their reading material by browsing a journal. One solution might be a simple as concise and accurate abstracts to articles in order to assist the reader in moving quickly to the desired information. Editor G. E. Gorman (2000) rightfully bemoans the lack of an abstract from many Asian writers and the "mini-discourse" provided by American authors. He suggests that an abstract of 100 words is appropriate. Library administrators should also know that the most desired information is that which will assist the employee in performing job duties. Yet heavy workloads, which were implied by many, prohibit employees from reading this information and so change and improvement are delayed.

Another finding is that most US librarians are interested in information science issues worldwide. Geographical borders have blurred and literary borders must do so as well. Several respondents mentioned that they see more articles on libraries outside the US in the literature so perhaps there is a trend in this direction. Yet an equal amount said they would read about the international library issues if only they had access to such information!

Obviously, the purpose of the literature is to share information and librarians read it to improve their libraries or themselves. The more that is known about how librarians "use" the information, the more likely it is that the professional literature will improve in ways that will facilitate this professional growth. This study asked why librarians read, what they read, and how much they read. Further research is needed to explore how this accumulation of knowledge (or information) that is gained from reading is used to create change.

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